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ABSTRACT

Metaphor-making is a universal human endeavor that manifests across cultures in various ways. Analyzing metaphors enables educators to gain a greater understanding of many social and cultural issues. Teaching children to write through metaphor based upon their emotional landscapes can reveal much of their inner worlds. Such texts can have a cathartic emotional, spiritual and intellectual value. (Contains 20 references and 8 poems written by students.) (Author/RS)

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Sin, Hope and Optimism in Children's Metaphors.

by Deborah Fraser

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Sin, Hope and Optimism in Children's Metaphors

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Abstract

Metaphor-making is a universal human endeavour that manifests across cultures in various ways. Analysing metaphors enables us to gain a greater understanding of many social and cultural issues. Teaching children to write through metaphor based upon their emotional landscapes, can reveal much of their inner worlds. Such texts can have cathartic emotional, spiritual and intellectual value.

Introduction

> The term [metaphor] originally comes from Greek *metaphora* (*meta*, meaning 'over', and *pherein*, 'to carry') and is a form of figurative language which has been scrutinised and widely debated. (Stacey, 1997, p. 49)
>
> Metaphor: the use of a word or expression 'which in literal usage denotes one kind of thing or action [but] is applied to a distinctly different kind of thing or action, without asserting a comparison.' (Abrams cited in Stacey, 1997)
>
> All language, by the very nature or its 'transferring' relation to 'reality'...is fundamentally metaphorical...Metaphor is a function of language, not of picture-making...it is the 'omni-present principle' of all language. Indeed, all languages contain deeply embedded metaphorical structures which covertly influence overt meaning. (Hawkes, 1972, p. 60)
>
> Metaphor is not just a function of language...of mere words...human thought processes are largely metaphorical...the human conceptual system is metaphorically saturated and defined. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 6)

The traditional study of metaphor has largely resided in philosophy and literary criticism but since at least the 1970s, metaphor has become a serious subject of scrutiny by linguists, sociolinguists, sociologists and psychologists (Winner, 1997). Anthropology and therapeutic counselling also employ metaphors to assist in understanding culture, social practices and personal issues (Monk, Winslade, Crocket & Epston, 1997). Different uses of metaphor reflect people's sociocultural constructions of the world and can indicate what is significant in a particular culture and what is personally significant to those who create metaphors. Many have argued that metaphors make us, rather than the other way around (Stacey, 1997) and this influence may have more significance than we realise for children's development.

Cultural values and metaphors

The cultural values of particular groups and societies are often revealed and reinforced through metaphor. The narratives, expressions and key words used in a culture often signify what is held with high regard, cherished or revered. The use of metaphors to convey important values of a culture is universal and they can be found in such diverse texts as:

Buddhist writings:

In this ocean of the world in which it is so hard to live, this great round of misery will never end;

Confucius sayings:

Study without thinking, and you are blind; think without studying, and you are in danger;

and *Celtic proverbs:*

Obdurate is the human race-harder than stones are their hearts-when they do not pay attention to the vastness of all the pains.

Much can be learnt about the central values, beliefs and attitudes of people through the metaphors they construct. For example, a Maaori whakatauki (or proverb) reads as follows:

Na tau rourou

Na take rourou

Ka ora ai te manuhiri

This is literally translated as:

By your food basket

And my food basket

The visitors will be fed.

Food is an important facet of Maaori kawa (protocol) when hosting visitors. After a formal ceremony on the marae (meeting place) when the visitors have been formally welcomed (powhiri) and speeches and songs are performed, the visitors are taken to the wharekai (eating house) and waited upon by the hosts. Food is not offered to individuals but rather, a series of long tables are laden with a variety of foods from which visitors can choose what they wish. In addition to the provision of hospitality, this procedure has a spiritual significance. During the formal welcoming and speeches the visitors are regarded as tapu (sacred) and are accordingly treated in a deferential manner. With the sharing of food at the end of the ceremony the tapu is deemed to be lifted from the visitors and they become noa (free from tapu). This symbolic way of lifting the tapu enables an atmosphere of ease and relaxation.

The whakatauki, however, does not just pertain literally to the provision of food and the role of it in the welcoming of visitors. The implied meaning is the importance of pooling resources, working collectively, sharing with others and collaboratively solving problems. Such activities are highly valued in Maaori culture and in the past have been essential for survival. In addition, there are many stories

from Maaori mythology in which Maui (a demi-God) employs the collective skills and strength of his brothers to sail his waka (canoe) and to slow down the sun. The message from these narratives is that we can achieve many great things, things which seem impossible, if we work together and maximise our resources.

The metaphors of different cultures and beliefs reveal much about what is valued and how the world is perceived. They also indicate the innate creativity of language within and across cultures.

The creativity of metaphors

The literary use of metaphor has a long history and the creation of powerful images through a range of texts continues. The construction of metaphors not only reflects cultural values but in the following examples, they also juxtapose elements in unexpected and unusual ways:

> Woke at midnight, swimming up through aubergine nightmare. (Proulx, 1993, p. 29)
>
> Trousers a sullen crookedness of wool. (p. 37)
>
> The ocean twitched like a vast cloth spread over snakes. (p. 193)
>
> The houses sit on their handkerchiefs and early in the morning begin to sneeze. (Grace, 1987, p. 67)

These extracts are evocative and playful. The effectiveness of these metaphors is due to their novelty and unexpected quality. Nightmares are not usually associated with aubergines, nor trousers with sullenness. These metaphors successfully avoid hackneyed expressions such as "the ocean was dotted with white caps" or "her wool trousers were wrinkled as if she had slept in them". The forming of such metaphors reveal the creative process of combining unrelated ideas in unique ways. Using metaphors enables the creative process to manifest itself and Gordon (1974), Mednick (1962), Torrance (1988) and Koestler (1970) emphasise the metaphorical in their analyses of creativity. For example, Mednick (1962) defined creativity as the forming of associative elements into new combinations. Torrance (1995) acknowledged that the creative process "has been seen as contributing original ideas, different points of view and new ways of looking" (p. 67). This "new way of looking" is evident in the vivid images that metaphorical expressions generate. One of Torrance's other definitions captures the notion of the unexpected combinations of metaphors when he stated that, "creativity is listening for smells" (1988, p. 50). This pithy and playful expression encapsulates how disparate items can be combined through metaphor in novel ways. Creating metaphors like this requires flexibility of thinking and cognitive fluency.

In addition to the use and development of cognition, metaphors can tap emotions in cathartic ways as explained below.

Teaching children to write with metaphors

Creating a metaphor and communicating it to others helps children to get to the essence of an idea. The process of metaphor-making can also be an emotional event, tapping into the inner world of the child and revealing issues of personal and social import to the child. This opportunity to explore social and emotional issues through metaphor can be both a cathartic and self-enhancing process. And as a corollary, Feinburg and Mindess (1994) claimed that metaphor deepens children's understanding and involvement.

A pedagogical process that assists children's metaphor writing in this vein has been undertaken by the author on a number of occasions with classes of children from six to eleven years of age. The lesson in each case began with children volunteers reading vignettes of personification from Gendler (1988) who explores dimensions of humanity from pleasure to pain. Gendler writes about these human emotions and experiences as if they were real people. For example, "Worry has written the definitive work on nervous habits. She etches lines on people's foreheads when they are not paying attention" (p. 3), and " Sensuality does not wear a watch but she always gets to the essential places on time" (p. 97). After sharing a number of these the children then suggested qualities of their teacher and focussed on one in particular. This quality was discussed as a class as if it was a person they might meet. For example, one class chose 'creativity' and we discussed what sort of house Creativity would live in, what job he or she might have, what kind of clothes Creativity would wear, what hobbies, passions or past-times Creativity might enjoy and who his or her friends might be. The children readily suggested various ideas and we discussed how well their suggestions matched with concepts of 'creativity'. The children were then encouraged to select a quality or emotion of their own choosing to write about. In each class the author has worked with the children have shown much enthusiasm for writing in this manner.

The following metaphorical texts composed by children personify a range of emotions they chose to focus upon:

Hope

She wears a pale white cloak

Her eyes are blue and seem to glow

Her face is lit up as though she has been waiting for something

For a long time and finally it has come.

Her hair is raven black and in it she wears a pearl white ribbon.

Wherever she walks, good things happen as if to make a trail.

Her best friend is Joy because to be hopeful you must have first experienced Joy.

She has had many jobs like a nurse and a biologist for both jobs involve helping.

She understands people and is never greedy.

She is fair and is a gainer and a giver.

She has what is important, that is friends.

If you are ever to meet her, remember that first impressions do not matter to her.

(Kate F., age 10)

Madness

He wears a bright red silk coat

And lives in a world of anger.

He eats chillies and wasabi

And drinks wasabi water.

His job is a rates collector.

His nature is fire.

He wants to kill Happiness.

Watch out, he is slinky.

(Richard, age 8)

Glum

Glum wears grey and black robes and cloaks

And he is 78 years old.

He lives in a dark, dark cave

He hasn't really done anything mainly because he mopes around

And mutters to himself.

He has no friends

And he despises Laughter, Happiness and Humour

Because they take too much pleasure in life.

Glum's bed is made out of thunder clouds

And his pillow is lightning.

His only delight is in other peoples UNHAPPINESS.

Beware of Glum he's on the prowl!

(Andrew D., age 10)

Adventurous

Adventurous wears a black shirt

Covered in all types of badges

From places he has visited

Parts of the world as far apart as Mt Everest

And the Japanese Trench

Or the freezing North Pole

And the steaming equator.

He doesn't have a real home

One settled place with friends and family

He has a friend who sees him frequently

Called Curiosity.

They meet at isolated camp sites

In densely packed rain forests

Or on snowy peaks of mountains.

They share spicy foods

From far away places

With ingredients untried

And plan their next journey.

Adventurous never hesitates

He always takes a risk.

(Andrew H., age 10)

Glory

Every day she will wait till sunset.

She is the daughter of the rise of the sun.

People believe she forms into the golden hemisphere at dawn

And fades at night.

She's clever and rays fling from her arms.

She's addicted to the fire's warning of night.

She will adore the brightness.

(Kate S., age 7)

Secret

Secret is in a ruby-red car.

He is dressed in a sky blue shirt and pants

But deep inside him his soul is as black

As the opals in a cave

Reflecting away any good.

He prances around like Excited or Handsome

But he observes every detail

And tells his boss Death

Everything he sees.

Death flings him a bag of gold coins

And he scurries off from the underworld

Up to the overworld

Where he prances off again

Ready to do anything

For the gold coins he is carrying.

(Shaun, age 9)

Greed

Greed wears expensive dark trench coats.

I first met Greed when I was two.

Suddenly Greed started to filter through my skin.

While I tried to resist him,

Like a tsunami

Another flourish of Greed came over me

And I started piling lollipops

In the trolley

At the supermarket.

My brief encounter with Greed was not pleasant.

Don't ask him to dinner as he'll only want more and more

And when his stomach starts to ache

He'll blame it all on you.

(Alan, age 10)

Passion

Passion is single minded

She is an obsession

Demanding attention

Yet quiet in contemplation.

She can be a follower

As well as a leader.

Passion is her own style.

(Brie, age 11)

Communicating from the inner world of the child

Such metaphorical writing can convey a depth of understanding of emotions, dreams, fears and beliefs. The writing seems to provide a vehicle through which children can reveal feelings and thoughts in a relatively safe way. The young authors published here reveal something of their unique views of the world through a vehicle that encourages originality.

This "externalising" of thoughts and emotions is an effective approach adopted in narrative therapy. By externalising an issue (or problem) through a narrative like this allegory, children can examine it afresh and not feel overwhelmed or a victim of certain emotions (see for example, Monk, 1997). This can be especially useful with emotions such as anger, resentment, terror, loneliness and feeling different. The narrative enables them to develop intrapersonal intelligence (knowing oneself) but not lose face in the public domain. Through narratising an emotion or human behaviour children can reveal what they feel but not be in a position where they feel that they are patently revealing their own vulnerability.

Metaphor is also a way to work through a range of responses and behaviours related to a certain emotion and examine the impact these have had. The personifying or narratising of an emotion can help children to imagine how emotions, like people, are different and play a variety of roles in our lives. Furthermore, the narrative can provide children with the license to "rescript" their lives in ways they desire. They can identify the times that they felt in control of an emotion in ways that were affirming and encouraging. By identifying these times of control they can generate ways to increase these circumstances and become a character in their own story "who has strength that can be called on in the tough circumstances of life" (Monk, 1997, p. 19). Narratising emotions reveals how many issues are constructed in a social, cultural and political context. What becomes important in a child's life is the result of complex factors from many sources. The child, however, is the "expert" on his or her life and as such, metaphors can be a vehicle through which he or she takes a position of positive control, insight and personal growth. In addition, Salovey and Mayer (1990) stated that emotional intelligence includes knowing one's emotions, managing feelings, recognising emotions in others and handling relationships. It seems that metaphorical analyses of emotions of import in a child's life can assist in the development of these social and emotional skills. Similarly, Richardson (1988) argued that personal insight and growth are fundamentals of creative giftedness and in creative writing, children should choose a topic with which they have an emotional bond. Richardson believed this helps their sensitivity to, and awareness of, deep feelings. Through such writing he asserted that

> ...the individual is actively involved in learning to understand and enjoy the self and the interactions which arise in living, looking, feeling, touching, dreaming, wondering, loving, thinking, hating and the like. (1988, p. xii)

Furthermore, Bruner (1996) claimed that creating stories through narrative such as metaphors or stories enables people to make sense of their experience, impose structure on their thoughts, explain ideas and concepts and communicate to others. He suggested that the widespread use of narrative indicates that we are preadapted to narrative ways of understanding ideas, concepts and feelings. As a tool for the social, emotional and cognitive development of children, therefore, metaphor can be especially appropriate.

There also appears to be spiritual growth inherent in such use of metaphors. The topics the children chose to write about ranged from sin and hope, to optimism. Their insights and reflections indicate a desire for connection, a search for meaning, a hunger for joy and a deep-seated creative drive (Kessler, 2000). The sense of connection in their writing is indicated in their apparent desire to be truly seen and known. Their texts indicate a deep connection to their inner selves. Some of the topics indicate a search for meaning and purpose in the exploration of thoughts and feelings that range from the personal to the profane. There is also a sense of great joy and delight in some of the topics chosen and this optimism dances from the page. In addition, there is something rather mysterious and profound in some of the

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texts. The children's creative drive is evident in their unique lens on life.

Another creative corollary of metaphor is that it encourages a form of language introspection. The process of writing a metaphor is not a direct reflection of speech, just as talk is not a direct reflection of thought. The words we use to communicate, whether it be through speech, sign or writing are interpretations devised by humans for the purpose of conveying meaning. An exact understanding remains elusive as we all bring our own cultural perspective to language and the layers of meaning behind and between the words. Vygotsky (1934/1962) clarified this point when he metaphorically described:

> A thought can be compared to a cloud shedding a shower of words. Precisely because thought does not have its automatic counterpart in words, the transition from thought to word leads through meaning. (p. 150)

Metaphor allows and encourages an introspection that enables us to learn more about how children make sense of themselves and their world. In addition, the metaphors of particular cultures enable us to gain a far richer and deeper understanding of cultural values than what is indicated by the literal meanings of words.

Conclusion

Metaphors have educational uses beyond the cognitive and literary. They can provide poignant insights and enhance emotional development. Children have the capacity to create metaphors that reveal personal values, emotional and spiritual awareness that can belie their chronological age. Personifying emotions is one way that children can employ metaphors that explore the inner landscapes of their lives.

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